

THE STUDY OF CHINESE PAINTING TODAY

For Release

Mooney - July 16 with Waterfli  
by Monet

Metzler - July 17 "

Kirkwood - July 21 "

No apologies are needed for an exhibition of Chinese paintings at this time and place. But it may be well to recall the status of that ancient and honorable tradition. For this is no mere exotic art newly catering to the often over-stimulated tastes of the modern Occidental. Beginning at least with the fourth century B.C., and continuing for over two thousand years, the artists of China painted great pictures in quantity and in continuous and conscious sequence. The social rank of their scholar-painters was on a level with that only grudgingly accorded to Western masters at the time of the Renaissance. Serious historical and critical literature on Chinese painting dates from the fifth century of the Christian era and continues without pause. Since painting was done with the brush, the same instrument used by the man of letters, the results were considered on almost as high a level as that accorded to calligraphy in a society that literally and figuratively worshipped the written character. If the artist had done nothing but invent the Chinese landscape painting, he would have established his right to a position on Parnassus coequal with any Westerner. But he also developed the handscroll, that almost musical format of painting through time, an accomplishment of the highest order and one only recently matched by the cinema. Disciplined imagination, selective realism, philosophic depth, technical virtuosity and traditional continuity establish Chinese painting as one of the major contributions of the Orient to the art of the world.

Yet Occidental appreciation and study of Chinese painting is relatively recent and has been subject to the wild oscillations of taste usual in this age of rapid transformation and change. It begins with the knowledge of Chinese artisan's work implicit in the Chinoiseries of eighteenth century Rococo and with the even lesser productions of the trade ports of Canton and Fukien made for the tastes of European and American merchant-traders in the nineteenth century. No paintings of any importance could have been known before the second

half of the nineteenth century when the breakdown of the Empire led to chaos and to the dispersal of painting collections. The Westernization of Japan after 1868 was another break in the dam which had prevented access to fine Chinese paintings, for the islanders had deliberately collected paintings from the mainland for religious reasons as early as the eighth century, and for aesthetic reasons from the fourteenth century.

With the notable exception of the handscroll "Admonitions of the Court Instructress" probably by Ku K'ai-chih in The British Museum, nearly all of our first real contacts with Chinese painting were made through Japan. Many of these contacts at the turn of the century were made by those connected with the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The name of its first Curator of Oriental Art, Okakura and those of Ernest Fenollosa and Denman Ross are forever associated with the early formation of that greatest of Western collections of Chinese painting. Charles Freer in Detroit and Laurence Binyon in London felt the influence of Boston. The former in his collections now in the Freer Art Gallery in Washington and the latter in his writings were most influential in molding early tastes for Chinese painting. These tastes were pre-eminently Japanese, so much so that Fenollosa for example used the Japanese equivalents of Chinese names when he wrote about the masters of the Middle Kingdom. Since Japan was unusually rich in Chinese paintings associated with Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism of the Southern Sung period, it was only natural that this style, one of many, became the Chinese style for Westerners of the first quarter of this century. While some efforts were made to give a more complete idea of painting from a Chinese point of view, notably by John Ferguson, these proved to be abortive until the first wave of mystical and often sentimental adoration of all "one-cornered" compositions on darkened silk had spent its force.

The great event that signalled the end of this first phase was the "International Exhibition of Chinese Art" at London in 1935-36. The committee

of selection, led by Sir Percival David, succeeded in obtaining the cooperation of the Chinese Government and no less than 175 works of painting and calligraphy were sent from the Palace Museum to London. In a sense it was a lost opportunity since the majority of Occidental scholars were unprepared for Chinese paintings selected by Chinese standards. While some of the exhibits were of questionable quality or authenticity, the majority were of the highest interest and importance but of little immediate influence. However, memory of them, hindsight and after thought, undoubtedly did much to spark a new Western appreciation of Chinese painting.

This phase had begun before the London exhibition in the minds and activities of a few individuals, notably the Sinologist John E. Lodge, Director of the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington and the historian of Italian painting turned historian of Chinese art, Osvald Siren. The latter's History of Later Chinese Painting was the first major statement of interest in the painting of the Yuan, Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties. This later period had been looked upon as one of utter decline by those trained through Japanese taste; but the often cold brilliance, intellectual probity and daring individualism of the Ming and Ch'ing painters quickly penetrated the receptive consciousness of the new generation of scholars. These were either Sinologists, historically pre-disposed to sympathy with Chinese attitudes which rated later painters very high indeed, or gifted amateurs and art-historians conditioned by the modern movement in European painting to an acceptance of the daring, the unusual and the non-sentimental. The European culmination of the new approach to Chinese painting was surely the Exhibition of Chinese Art at Venice in 1954, where of the 129 paintings exhibited, only 17 bore attributions to the Sung Dynasty or earlier while 101 were of the Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties alone. The relatively even distributions of the London exhibition gave way before great enthusiasm for later Chinese painting and the very real lack of original early paintings in Europe, in contrast to the considerable American holdings, particularly at Boston, Washington and

Kansas City.

This then is where we rest today. Oddly enough the situation is not unlike that rarely but still to be found in the study of European painting. Rival claimants for Italian Renaissance painting and the Northern schools of the Netherlands and Germany have at times rationalized their favorites to victory. In some minds the Classical Tradition fights a triumphant if figurative battle with "barbaric" art forms from Africa, the South Seas and - Asia. Happily such contrived victories are becoming ever rarer and a more rational, objective, even scientific attitude is taking precedence in art history and criticism. While few wish, I hope, for the abolition of "feeling" and instinct, it is now no longer enough to educate or convince by feeling. We know only too well how different, how capricious, how unconsciously prejudiced, feelings can be. If we now are enthusiastic about Shen Chou and Wang Yuan-ch'i we must be especially on guard when we reject an "old-fashioned" Southern Sung painting of Japanese provenance.

The study of Chinese painting seems to be at a point somewhat like that reached in the study of European painting almost a century ago. We know where many of the paintings are. We are beginning to have access to numerous photographs and reproductions. We know the general outlines of historical developments from Chinese sources and from some Western histories. We have a very few monographs on individual paintings, painters and schools of painting. We must go on from here.

Any progress must depend in large part on the comparison of paintings, not photographs. The 8 x 10 glossy print is a great blessing and a hidden curse. Granted we can compare more and quickly; but we then tend to look too quickly at originals and seldom do we compare comparables side by side. Where would the study of European art be were it not for the great yearly exhibitions at Burlington House in London, the "one-man" shows of Venetian masters at Venice, the "survey" exhibitions regularly held in Germany, France and the Netherlands?

Far, yes; but not so far as we have gone. How many false starts could have been avoided by direct comparisons! Let us then have more exhibitions, rather than fewer; but let them be purposeful.

Objective study of Chinese painting means the use of all possible tools of research. The art historian, scientist and sinologist repel each other at their peril. Paintings do have colophons and seals. These and their implications can be checked by philological and historical methods. Discrepancies can be found; some are damaging, often fatally so. Pigments can be analyzed, the cutting of seals compared, the age of silk estimated. Failure on these grounds is usually fatal for authenticity. But then there are the paintings, and here objectivity borders on subjectivity. Still the effort must be made and not merely on Chinese terms. Focillon among others recognized that artists are artists, because they see, think and feel in forms. The now complex training of the art historian should include knowledge of subtleties of brushwork, composition, color and their interrelations suitable for use as a tool in the study of authenticity and relationship. We need not descend to the absolutism of Zeitgeist or Kunstwollen to shackle the now dead Chinese master with a chain of possible forms of our invention. But surely we can expect that a Chinese artist of the seventeenth century had X capabilities when compared with a compatriot of the tenth century with N possibilities. We must try to find N and X within the framework of existing paintings and supporting records. Current excavations and publications in China are revealing much new and important source material. If the Chinese stress brushwork as the principal criterion for judgment of quality and authenticity, let us by all means use such a criterion. But there are others and it is not improbable that Western critics are more sensitive to subtleties of composition, both planar and spatial, than are their Chinese counterparts. The Italian painters of the Trecento undoubtedly did not discuss the detailed painting of ears, fingernails and nostrils. They took these for granted, and in this they revealed most clearly their individual and group

assumptions. Thus, that type of analysis begun by Morelli and continued by Offner and others and the painstaking separation of schools and individuals. Is Chinese painting not susceptible to such study? If it is not, then the Chinese painter is not an artist; he does not think in visual terms, and this is patently absurd. Product of a great tradition, producer of paintings acclaimed "divine," he is worthy of the love, study and criticism we have lavished on his Western peers. If the study of Chinese painting is still in an archaic state we can be pleased, for then we are pioneers and, right or wrong, must make the effort we do. In the words of G. Ferrero, "It is, therefore, a moral duty for the man of science to expose himself to the risk of committing error and to submit to criticism, in order that science may continue to progress." These thoughts are embodied in a pithy but anonymous parallel, "What makes good judgement? Experience. What makes experience? Bad judgement."

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Sherman E. Lee